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ABSTRACT

A study evaluated the effectiveness of a portfolio strategy to assess reading in the early primary grades. For a 12-week period, college students implemented portfolio assessment as they completed their reading block field experiences as part of their literacy/reading methods courses. Data included the portfolios, teacher surveys, journals of the preservice teachers, and observational notes and records recorded throughout the period. Results indicted that: (1) comprehension and language development could feasibly be tracked through the interviews, retells, running records, anecdotal data, text reconstructions, and language experience activities; (2) teachers and prospective teachers reported that the children were becoming better critics of their own work; and (3) during the on-site teaching of the methods course, classroom teachers were partners with higher education faculty as they cooperatively guided preservice teachers with hands-on experiences. Findings suggest that the awareness, acceptance, and utilization of portfolio assessment by practicing early primary grade teachers needs to be supported and ethnographic research continued. (Contains 29 references and two figures of data.) (RS)

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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE USE OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN A LITERATURE BASED READING PROGRAM

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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE USE OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN A LITERATURE-BASED READING PROGRAM

Research in early literacy has provided us with the conditions that promote language development and total literacy. Consequently, more primary grade teachers responsible for teaching reading are capitalizing on this wealth of information. Cognizant that children's literature is central to a literacy environment and that it serves as a model for language learning, more teachers are using literature-based reading programs. Literature provides strong motivation for learning to read and write. It is a springboard for all sorts of literacy-related activities (Morrow, 1993). However, to immerse children in quality literature, nurture them in the joy of reading and authorship, and then to test their reading performance in the traditional conventional way seems contradictory. Therefore, teachers are seeking alternatives for assessment and evaluation that they deem both feasible and effective. Most teachers are familiar with the phrase portfolio assessment but have varying interpretations of what it is.

Whether termed "authentic" assessment, "alternative" assessment, or "performance" assessment, one principle prevails, growth of children should be examined within the context of what they do. Portfolio/performance based assessment is a natural outcome of hands-on teaching and learning. Portfolio assessment has been defined as the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting work that children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect the child (NAEYS & NAECS/SDE, 1991, p. 21). It requires children to

demonstrate not only what they know but also what they can do. The performance is the link to the "real world." Portfolio assessment is an ongoing appraisal of the development of the child. Authentic assessment celebrates this development and learning, and capitalizes upon the strengths of the learner. Additionally, portfolio assessment is developmentally appropriate and based on real-life events and actual performance. While being related to instruction, portfolio assessment represents purposeful learning that is collaborative in nature. Assessment must be valid, deal with the whole child and involve repeated observations, and a variety of other methods. Finally it must be used to change the programming to meet the individual needs of the children. This kind of assessment process provides an understanding of the uniqueness of each child and an understanding of the child's perceptions. A better understanding of children increases the likelihood of more informed and accurate decision making regarding their development.

With regard to reading and language arts, Tchudi (1991) states that this approach begins with the students' language as a starting point for instruction and allows for natural progression as skills are built developmentally. Furthermore, authentic assessment connects language and literature, integrates reading, writing, listening, and speaking, uses students' own experiences with life and treats language as a whole. Many teachers have been skeptical about using the portfolio assessment believing it to be cumbersome and very time consuming. Some teachers are in fact using it, particularly with project oriented assignments, but just lack the

continuous, systematic practice that leads to comprehensive accurate decisions.

Purpose

Research about emergent literacy has contributed significantly to curriculum changes in reading in the early primary grades leading to more developmentally appropriate practices. However, there still appears to be a discrepancy between developmentally appropriate teaching practices and methods of assessment and evaluation in reading. Based on the philosophy that language is learned in functional meaningful ways and developed through holistic integrated teaching, there is a need to examine the common practice of assessing reading with the diagnosis and remediation approach (Glazer and Brown, 1993). Therefore, it was the purpose of this study to develop an alternative method of evaluation for reading in the early primary grades that would be received by the early primary teachers as both feasible and effective. The portfolio strategy was selected as this method provides for multiple dimensions, is continuous, takes place in a natural setting, incorporates a variety of learning styles, and is more consistent with beliefs about how children learn.

Method

Through the administration of a survey (see Fig. 1) to seventeen teachers it was determined that the portfolio strategy of assessment was not being used by most of the respondents (See Fig. 2). Additional subjects for the study were children selected by cooperating teachers from one of the school systems that provides field experiences for the college students enrolled in the

literacy/reading methods courses. College students enrolled in our literacy methods courses participated in portfolio assessmenttraining sessions. The students received training and practice related to techniques of interviewing, anecdotal and running records, language experience, text reconstruction, and retell with regard to literature based and whole language reading programming.

For a 12 week period, the college students implemented the portfolio assessment as they completed their reading block field experiences. Portfolios were collected and shared in the methods classes. Samples of writing or dictated stories, art work, lists of books read, running records or observations of text reconstruction, literature extension projects and other useful examples of the child's work were collected. Initial interviews were conducted using the form developed by Goodman, Watson, and Burte. Interesting journal entries of the children were photocopied and dated. Checklists used for analysis of writing (Sharp, 1989) and retells (Brown & Cambourne, 1990) were also included. Entries were made in personal journals kept by each preservice teacher. Many of these entries were specifically reflective of observations while guiding the children. The preservice teachers noted the children's enjoyment of books, requests for or checking out specific books, attempts at invented spelling, recognition of conventions of punctuation, storytelling ability, and other processes and products of the children. Audio cassettes also provided records of reading development at the beginning, intermittently, and at the end of the study. These were

the reading samples that were used for the running record assessment. In most cases, a video recording was made of the subjects while reading orally. The culminating activity was aportfolio assessment written in the form of an authentic assessment report. It included the child's strengths, evidence of progression in reading and writing development, identification of concerns and strategies to promote continued development and ways of celebrating literacy development. Cooperating teachers used the portfolios to share this assessment information with parents and administrators.

Results and Conclusions

The analysis of the portfolios, teacher surveys, journals of pre-service teachers, and observational notes and records recorded throughout the study revealed the following findings:

(1) Comprehension and language development could feasibly be tracked through the interviews, retells, running records, anecdotal data, text reconstructions, and language experience activities. At the onset of the study, teachers had expressed skepticism about the amount of paper work and time that would be spent in the data collection for the portfolio. However, at the culmination of the study, teachers reported that the strategy was effective with regard to progress in reading and writing competencies and that the strategy was not as time consuming as they thought it would be. In fact the teachers concluded that the portfolios provided a better picture of the student's actual ability. The consensus of the participating teachers was reflected in the following quotations: "The portfolio just evolved from the routine things that we have

always done." "It was not the addition of more things to do but rather just a more systematic way of collecting what we already do" (Holmes and Morrison, 1993). Teachers were experiencing assessment that was integrated with instruction and was continuous.

(2) Teachers and prospective teachers reported that the children were becoming better critics of their own work. Children were involved in selecting samples for the portfolio. Children would choose to retape a reading of a story or to retape the reading of a poem. Noteworthy is that some of the children who were not accustomed to being videotaped did not appear natural in the earlier videotapes. However, with time this was not a problem. Children made requests to repeat different strategies to improve their performance. Shared decision making encourages language growth and learning. Teachers commented about how the display of children's behaviors during the portfolio collection contrasted with their behavior in traditional testing sessions.

(3) During the on-site teaching of the methods course classroom teachers were partners with higher education faculty as they cooperatively guided preservice teachers with hands-on experiences. This partnership also extended to the implementation of class action research for the purpose of improving instruction for children. This collaborative effort was successful. This indeed is a step in alleviating the discrepancies between instructional practices and those used for assessment. Some of the teachers have continued the assessment strategies after the culmination of the study.

Several limitations were noted. Pre-service teachers usually

had limited say in what was included in their portfolio of the children with whom they were tutoring. Data were limited to literary products and indicators of literary processes. Teachers still contributed a part of the success of the portfolio assessment to the fact that they had an extra helper (referring to the pre-service teacher) in the room. Finally, the data collection was limited to a twelve week period.

Recommendations

The awareness, acceptance, and utilization of portfolio assessment by practicing early primary grade teachers needs to be supported.

> In real life children are most themselves when they are in familiar environments with adults and children whom they know and trust, engaged in tasks that allow them to use the modalities with which they are most comfortable. In such situations they will most likely demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that truly represent their attainments. When we introduce strange people, unfamiliar surroundings, demand for responses to atypical tasks, and constrictions on their usual behaviors, we will likely elicit behaviors that are neither valid nor reliable samples of the children's development and learning? (Hills, p. 22).

Many administrators have only limited knowledge or outdated knowledge about assessment. Many of these administrators will succumb or even encourage portfolio assessment when successful portfolio strategies have been demonstrated to serve instructional as well as administrative purposes and when the students are indeed developing, learning, and progressing well. Thus the research implies a need to continue ethnographic research that supports successful portfolio assessment that may contribute to the use of large-scale authentic assessment realistically affordable in most school systems.

FIGURE 1
SURVEY FOR TEACHERS ON AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Survey for Teachers

Please indicate level of knowledge and interest in classroom use of the following assessment approaches:

KEY

K1	I know this well and am using it presently.
K2	I know this well and am planning to use it.
K3	I know this well and am unable to use it.
K4	I know this well and am not interested in using it.
U1	I am unfamiliar with the term, but would like to learn about it.
U2	I am unfamiliar with the term and would not be interested in learning about it.
S1	I am somewhat knowledgeable about it and would like to learn more.
S2	I am somewhat knowledgeable about it, but would not like to learn more.

_____ Anecdotal records

_____ Running Record (Miscue Analysis)

_____ Retell

_____ Text Reconstruction

_____ Interview

_____ Creative Writing

_____ Checklists

_____ Portfolio assessment

_____ Audio/Video assessment

FIGURE 2

Survey for Teachers on Authentic Assessment

N=17

	K1	K2	K3	K4	U1	U2	S1	S2
Anecdotal records	9	1	1		3	1	2	
Running record	2		1	2	7	1	4	
Retell	8		1		4	2	2	
Text reconstruction	2		2		7	2	3	
Interview	10	1	1		2		3	
Creative Writing	12						4	
Checklists	10	1					6	
Portfolio assessment	6		2				9	
Audio/Visual assessment	3	1	2	1	2	2	6	

Anecdotal records	53%	K1 - know well and using it
Running record	41%	U1 - unfamiliar with term, but would like to learn about it
Retell	47%	K1
Text reconstruction	44%	U1
Interview	59%	K1
Creative Writing	75%	K1
Checklists	59%	K1 and 35% S1 - somewhat knowledgeable about and would like to learn about it
Portfolio assessment	53%	S1 and 35% K1
Audio/video assessment	35%	S1

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